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CHAUCER'S *NONNE PRESTES TALE* AND THE *ROMAN DE RENARD*

There seems to be a reaction at present, among literary historians, against the folklorist theory of literary development which would explain away the art of the individual writer of the Middle Ages by reducing his original contribution both in matter and in art to a minimum, making of an extant piece of literature the last term in a long series of *remaniements* by unknown authors, and not only the last but often the worst. This theory or method was more or less imposed upon literary historians by Wolf's theory of the composition of the Homeric poems; and has since been reinforced by students of folklore. Becker, in recent times, in his discussions of the epic cycle of William of Orange, first showed signs of revolt against the easy assumption of *cantilenae* and lost versions. Bédier in his *Légendes épiques* makes the systematic attempt to wipe away the accumulated mass of hypothetical ancestral literature for the French epic, to restore their own to the French poets of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and to explain the existing monuments of French epic poetry "by what we know of the eleventh century rather than by what we don't know of the ninth." We now find Professor Foulet doing the same thing for the *Roman de Renard*.¹

For those of us who have felt a certain dissatisfaction and irritation at the systematic application of methods, justifiable no doubt in the study of certain types of naïve and primitive literature, to the products of men whose work shows them to have been deliberate and conscious artists, the books of Bédier and Foulet bring a feeling of both pleasure and relief; and to those who love their Chaucer and are inclined to

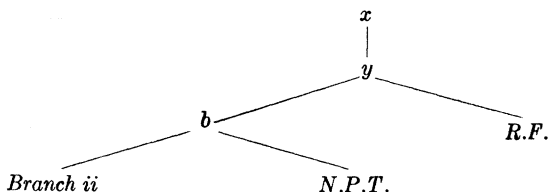
Take the fruyt and lat the chaf be stille

Foulet's book is peculiarly welcome.

¹ *Le Roman de Renard* (Paris, 1914) (fascicule 211 of the Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études).

In 1898 Miss Kate Petersen published in the *Radcliffe College Monographs* a study of "The Sources of the *Nonne Prestes Tale*." After a painstaking application of the traditional method of the folklorist to the question of Chaucer's sources, she arrives at this result (pp. 87-88):

Chaucer's original, therefore, seems to have been a version of the epic story which was very similar to the original of *R.F.* [i.e., *Reinhart Fuchs*], but which, at the same time, treated certain abridgments of the present *R.F.* version with the greater fullness that is found in the *Renart* account. A diagram may put the case more clearly:



Here *y* represents the source of *R.F.*, and *b* that of *N.P.T.*, and through one or more elaborations, that of Branch ii.

The original of Chaucer's Cock and Fox story may, therefore, be reconstructed, in part, by retaining (1) such features as are common to all three versions and (2) such as are common to *N.P.T.* and *Ren.* or to *N.P.T.* and *R.F.* The story would then run as follows:

2. Beside a grove (*Ren.*, *N.P.T.*, *R.F.* [implied]), dwells a woman (*R.F.*, *N.P.T.*, *Ren.* [implied]).

3. She is content with her property (*Ren.*, *R.F.*, *N.P.T.*) and with her provision of grain (*Ren.*, *R.F.*, *N.P.T.*) and bacon (*Ren.*, *N.P.T.*).

And so on for two pages.

Now Foulet, in the most exhaustive and penetrating study that has yet been made of the *Roman de Renard*, comes to these conclusions:

1. Branch II, which contains the Cock and Fox story, is not a *remaniement* at all (as Sudre and Voretzsch would have us think), but part of an original work of art by Pierre de Saint-Cloud, inspired by the Latin *Ysengrimus* and based upon this and other learned sources.

2. Martin was right in his original claim and later protests that the *Reinhart Fuchs* was based on the *existing* versions of the *Roman de Renard*. In short, if Foulet is right, *x*, *y*, *b*, and their like never

existed, and the lost version that Chaucer knew becomes a dream of nineteenth-century scholars and not the tangible creation of a twelfth-century *trouvère*. We are once more out of the bewildering maze of theme and motive *a, b, c, etc.*, and are forced to the old and simple conclusion that when Chaucer wrote his *Nun's Priest's Tale* he knew the existing version of the story in Branch II of the *Roman de Renard*, and probably Marie de France's fable; and it becomes once more a legitimate undertaking to use the existing version of the tale and study in Chaucer's work the method and skill of a great literary artist in the handling of his material.

But Professor Foulet does not discuss Chaucer in his book;¹ he merely puts him aside in a very brief note of two lines. Perhaps he has thus unwittingly left a dangerous weapon for the hands of those who would attack him. Let us briefly examine the question.

Why has it seemed necessary to assume some other source than the *Renart* that we know for Chaucer's version of the Cock and Fox story? The answer is simple. Chaucer does not slavishly follow Branch II. (Of course that is the last thing that a student of Chaucer should expect him to do, but we mention that only by the way, with no intention of insisting upon it here.) He makes changes in the story. Some of these changes bear a certain resemblance to variations from the Renart story that appear in the *Reinhart Fuchs*. Hence there must have been an earlier version to account for this agreement between Chaucer and the *Reinhart Fuchs* against the *Renart* version. Hence *x, y, b, etc.* But this solution is not imposed upon us if we once refuse to admit the application of the consecrated method to Chaucer and Heinrich der Glîchezârre. There is still the alternative that Chaucer and Heinrich, both working as independent men of letters with the same material—the existing Branch II—reached results that have a remote resemblance at certain points.

Let us examine some of Chaucer's changes with this thought in mind. These changes fall into two classes: (1) changes that exist in Chaucer alone; (2) variations from the *Renart* story in Chaucer

¹ It is interesting to note that Foulet reviewed Miss Petersen's monograph in *Rom. XXVIII* (1899), 296–303, and found then that "Les conclusions auxquelles arrive Miss P. sont parfaitement justifiées par la discussion précise et excellemment conduite qui les précède, et elles nous semblent solidement établies." He mentions this review in his recent book only by the remark, "Nous avions autrefois apporté notre petite pierre à l'édifice construit par le critique allemand" (p. 395).

which seem to have resemblances or suggestions in the variations in *Reinhart Fuchs*. It is the second class that interests us here, since it is this second class that would seem to forbid us to explain all Chaucer's changes as his own. I now follow Miss Petersen's list of points of agreement of *N.P.T.* and *R.F.* in opposition to *Renart*:

1. Their brevity and simplicity.—Miss Petersen says (p. 83):

Now the important question is: Where did this agreement in simplicity between *R.F.* and *N.P.T.* originate? One point is practically settled. The *R.F.* form of the story is an earlier form than the elaborate version of *Ren.* Did Chaucer, then, have for his source this earlier, simpler type, or did he have the elaborated one and himself reduce it to the same degree of simplicity which is found in *R.F.*?

The question is clearly put, but we must erase the "one point practically settled." Foulet "practically settles" it quite the other way. How then explain this agreement in simplicity and brevity? Let us allow Professor Foulet to speak for us, remembering that he is speaking with no thought of Chaucer.

Il faut renoncer, croyons-nous, à voir dans le *Reinhart Fuchs* un poème de saveur archaïque qui pourra nous tenir lieu de nos anciennes branches disparues; et où sera le mal, si rien du tout n'a disparu? L'originalité de l'œuvre est certainement ailleurs: c'est la première tentative qu'on ait faite dans une langue moderne pour grouper en un tout cohérent les aventures si nombreuses et si variées de Renard et d'Isengrin. De l'*Ysengrimus* de Nivard, du *Romulus*, de la *Disciplina clericalis*, d'ailleurs encore probablement, une légion de trouvères français avaient comme à l'envi extrait contes et historiettes où toujours sur le devant de la scène revenaient nos deux héros: et quelques-uns des poèmes ainsi composés faisaient preuve d'un art déjà singulièrement avancé. Mais si l'on pouvait rassembler en un recueil factice ces différentes compositions, il était impossible d'en former un corps harmonieusement organisé. Chaque poète avait travaillé à sa fantaisie, et il y paraissait. Il y avait beaucoup de branches, mais pas de tronc. Voulant faire connaître à ses compatriotes une matière si nouvelle et si diverse, le Glichezâre aurait pu prendre une des branches les plus caractéristique, II ou I par exemple, et se borner à traduire ou adapter ce spécimen de choix: c'est ce que fera plus tard le Flamand Willems. Le poète allemand, avec moins de talent sans aucun doute, fut plus ambitieux. Il se donna pour mission d'écrire une histoire complète de Renard et d'Isengrin, qui embrassât les principaux événements de leur vie et qui eût un commencement, un milieu et une fin. De plus il voulait que cette histoire fût courte.

Condenser et unifier, telle était la double tâche qui s'imposait dès lors à lui. La première était relativement aisée. Il ne s'agissait, dans cette abondante frondaison des branches françaises, que de tailler et d'élaguer. Chaque poème pourrait y perdre en intérêt et en charme, mais les grandes lignes du récit n'en subsisteraient pas moins.¹

We have then a case of two men of letters who have condensed and simplified the same story for different reasons: Chaucer because his shorter form is more artistic for one telling that story alone, and because it better suits his satirical purpose; Heinrich, because condensation and simplification were the natural result of a plan of bringing the different Renard stories into a connected whole.

2. The arrangement at the very beginning.—"*R.F.* and *N.P.T.* agree, in the second place, in the way in which the story opens. The first lines in *Ren.* are devoted to the fox, but *R.F.* and *N.P.T.* begin by describing the proprietor and the home of Chantecler and the hen" (p. 84). This statement of the case does not put the matter in all its bald simplicity, and seems to complicate the problem, if problem there is. Let us put it just as accurately but somewhat differently: Both Chaucer and Heinrich omit the first 26 lines of Branch II and begin the story with verse 27. Why? In the first place, Chaucer does it for the same reason that the reader of this article would begin there today. It is the natural place for one to begin who is going to tell the story of the Cock and Fox alone, not from the point of view of the fox but from the point of view of the cock and hens, as Chaucer tells it; or, if he were condensing and unifying his material, as Heinrich was.

Pierre de Saint-Cloud² is telling, not merely the story of the Cock and Fox, but

. . . la guerre
Qui tant fu dure de grant fin
Entre Renart et Ysengrin. [ll. 10-12.]³

He writes a prologue of 23 verses in which he tells us that we have heard many a tale of Paris and Helen, and of Tristan, and many

¹ *Le Roman de Renard*, p. 427.

² I use this name as a convenient way of saying "the author of Branch II"; not as an indication that I accept Foulet's theory of the identity of Perrot and Pierre de Saint-Cloud as proved. Cf. Nitze, *Modern Lang. Notes*, XXX (1915), pp. 189 ff.

³ I quote from the edition by E. Martin, Vol. I (Paris, 1882).

another tale, but never did we hear of this *guerre* of the fox and wolf. He has introduced his hero, the fox. He naturally begins his first story, which forms only a part of his poem, with the words:

Il avint chose que Renars,
 Qui tant par fu de males ars
 E qui tant sot toz jors de guile,
 S'en vint traiant a une vile. [ll. 23-26.]

These are the "first lines in *Ren.* . . . devoted to the fox" which Chaucer omits. What a blunderer he would have been to have included them, when he was going to tell this story only, throwing the emphasis entirely upon the cock and his wives, with that wonderful picture of the domestic relations and characters of Chantecler and dame Pertelote! But why should Heinrich omit them too? Heinrich writes a ten-line prologue of his own:

Vernemet vremdiu maere,
 diu sint vil gewaere,
 von einem tiere wilde,
 dâ man bî mac bilde
 nemen umbe manegiu dinc.
ez kêret allen sînen gerinc
an triegen und an kûndecheit,
 des quam ez dicke in arbeit.
ez hâte vil unkûste erkant
 und ist Reinhart fuhs genant. [ll. 1-10.]¹

It is evident that the author of Reinhart has here included in his short prologue the substance of the description of the fox in the four verses omitted by Chaucer:

Qui tant par fu de males ars
 E qui tant sot toz jors de guile.

Why should he repeat them when he begins the first story? Had he done so, we should, I suppose, be forced to conclude that the "earlier version" repeated the same thing within the short space of ten lines, a repetition which hardly makes for brevity and simplicity. We should also have to give Pierre de Saint-Cloud the credit of having the sense to remove the blunder.

¹ I quote from the edition by K. Reissenberger (Halle, 1886).

Let us omit for the moment variation 3, and take up 4, which seems to me much more important: the character of the woman, her age, and her importance in the story. In *Renart* the owner of the cock and hens is a rich *vilain*. In Chaucer we find no mention of him, but of

A poure wydwe somdel stape in age.

Why? As a last resort we might plead that Chaucer, if he wished to avoid a slavish following of his source, would naturally have changed "rich man" into "poor old woman." But we are not driven to this last resort. The old woman is there in Branch II. It is she who discovers the loss of the cock when she calls her hens:

La bone feme del mainil
A overt l'uis de son cortil.
Car vespres ert, por ce voloit
Ses jelines remetre en toit.
Pinte apela, Bise et Rosete.
L'une ne l'autre ne recete.
Quant voit que venues ne sont,
Molt se merueille qu'elles font.
Son coc reheue a grant aleine.
Renart regarde qui l'enmeine.
Lors passe avant por le rescote
Et li gorpils commence a core.
Quant voit que prendre nel porra,
Porpense soi qu'el crierà.
'Harou!' escrie a pleine gole,
Li vilein qui sont a la coule,
Quant il oent que cele bret,
Trestuit se sont cele part tret.
Si li demandent, que ele a.
En sospirant lor reconta
'Lasse, con m'est mal avenu!'
'Coment?' font il. 'Car j'ai perdu
Mon coc que li gorpil enporte.' [ll. 369-91.]

Now arrives Constant, the rich *vilain*, who has entirely dropped out of the story, and calls her a *pute vielle orde*. We have, then, not only a woman, but an old woman playing the important part in the action of the story. Chaucer makes her a widow by quietly suppressing her useless husband, and presents her in his stead with

"doghtren two." Chaucer's change seems thus satisfactorily explained without recourse to any older version. Unfortunately, however, "in *R.F.* the wife of Lanzelîn is made conspicuous; it is old Ruotzela who calls the hens hers." It is, by the way, the *pute vielle orde* who calls the hens hers in the French version. But let us see just how conspicuous *R.F.* does make the woman. After his prologue Heinrich describes the rich man and his possessions, and then says (19 ff.):

der was geheizen Lanzelîn.
bâbe Ruotzela daz wîp sîn.
 er hâte eine grôze klage:
 er muoste hûeten alle tage
 stner hûener vor Reinharte.
 sîn hof und sîn garte
 was niht beziunet ze fromen.
 dâ von muost er dicke komen
 ze schaden, den er ungerne sach.
bâbe Ruotzela zuo im sprach
"alter gouch, Lanzelîn,
nû hân ich der hûener mîn
von Reinharte zehen verlorn.
daz müet mich und ist mir zorn."
 meister Lanzelîn was bescholden,
 (daz ist noch unvergolden)
 doch er des niht enliez,
ern taete, als in Ruotzela hiez. [ll. 19–36.]

Behold the only mention of woman, old or young, in the *R.F.* version of the Cock and Fox story. It is Lanzelîn who discovers that Chantecler is stolen:

den schal vernam Lanzelîn.
 er sprach, "owê der hûener mîn!" [ll. 139–40.]

The old Ruotzela has said her few lines and left the stage for good and all. She appears no more; she takes absolutely no part in the action of the story. If either is conspicuous, it is the man Lanzelîn. I leave it confidently to the unprejudiced reader to decide in which poem, *Renart* or *Reinhart*, the woman plays the more prominent part in the action, and whether or not the woman in *R.F.* makes it necessary to abandon the explanation of Chaucer's change given

above and justifies us in assuming a common source for Chaucer and Heinrich other than our Branch II. The facts are before us; discussion seems idle.

We now skip to No. 7, which Miss Petersen calls "another likeness between *R.F.* and *N.P.T.* which may with still greater probability [than 5 and 6, which we have omitted for the moment] be held to have characterized the source of each" (p. 86). The likeness is this: To quiet Chantecler's fears Chaucer makes his fox address him in the following terms,

. . . 'Gentil sire, alas! wher wol ye gon?
Be ye affrayed of me that am youre freend?

My lord youre fader—God his soule blesse!
And eek youre mooder, of hire gentillesse,
Han in myn hous y-been, to my greet ese;
And certes, sire, ful fayn wolde I yow plese.

[ll. 464-65, 475-78.]¹

The fox continues with an account of the wonderful singing of Chantecler's father. Now in *Reinhart* we find that Reinhart, unable to reach Chantecler, addresses him thus:

" . . . wer ist, der dâ ûf stât?
bist dû daz Sengeln?"
"nein ich," sprach Schanteclêr, "ich enbin,
alsô hiez der vater mîn."
Reinhart sprach, "daz mac wol sîn,
nû riuwet mich dîns vater tût,
wan der dem minnesten êre bôt.
wan triuwe under künne,
daz ist michel wünne.
dû gebâres zuo undâre,
daz sag ich dir ze wâre.
dîn vater was des mînen vrô.
ern gesaz sus hôhe nie alsô,
gesaehe er den vater mîn,
ern vlûge ze im und hieze in sîn
willekomen. . . ."

[ll. 106-21.]

We have here, it would seem, in Chaucer and Heinrich a common emphasis upon the hospitable relations between the Cock and the

¹ I quote from the Oxford Chaucer.

Fox families which is not to be found in *Renart*. In Pierre de Saint-Cloud's account we read:

'Chantecler' ce li dist Renart,
 'Ne fuïr pas, n'aies regart!
 Molt par sui liez, quant tu es seinz:
 Car tu es mes cosins germeins.'
 Chantecler lors s'asoïra.
 Por la joie un sonet chanta.
 Ce dist Renars a son cosin
 'Membre te mes de Chanteclin,
 Ton bon pere qui t'engendra?
 Onques nus cos si ne chanta. [ll. 303-12.]

 Dist Chantecler, 'Renart cosin,
 Voles me vos trere a engin?'
 'Certes,' ce dist Renars 'non voil.
 Mes or chantez, si clinnies l'oeil!
 D'une char somes et d'un sanc.
 Meus voudroie estre d'un pie manc
 Que tu eüses maremenz:
 Car tu es trop pres mi parenz.' [ll. 319-26.]

Thus, in *Renart*, the fox claims that he and Chantecler are cousins, that they are of the same flesh and blood, that Chantecler is his *parenz*. Chaucer makes a sly, Chaucerian joke by having the fox say:

My lord youre fader—God his soule blesse!
 And eek youre mooder, of hire gentillesse,
 Han in myn hous y-been, to my greet ese.

Heinrich sticks by the point of relationship which he found in his original:

wan triuwe under künne,
 daz ist michel wünne.

One must be indeed under the spell of a particular method to find reason here for assuming a common source for Chaucer and Heinrich other than the existing Branch II.

In No. 8 we arrive at something more concrete, something which, if proved, we are accustomed to accept as final and unanswerable—"word resemblances" (p. 82):

i. The cock beats his wings with delight:

Die vitech begund er swingen. (129.) This Chauntecleer his winges gan to bete. (502.)

ii. The fox runs toward the wood:

Rehte hin gegen dem walde. (139.) And on his bak toward the wode him beer. (516.)

Now Pierre de Saint-Cloud, either through negligence or of deliberate intent, failed to have Chantecler beat his wings at any point in his story. Nor does he tell us that the fox ran toward the wood. He simply ran. He does tell us in the beginning that there was a *bos* near by, but he fails to mention it again when Renart runs. Must we have a common source for these "word resemblances"? If so, Miss Petersen furnishes it to us herself in a note at the foot of the page referring to Marie de France's fable:

Les eles bat, . . .

Vers la forest tut dreit s'en va.

I have referred above to the oft-repeated statement that Chaucer probably knew Marie's fable. Foulet thinks that Pierre de Saint-Cloud probably knew it too. There is no reason why Heinrich should have been ignorant of it. If he was, we shall have to add these two lines to the other 342 (out of the total of 2,262) which by common consent his critics allow him to have invented out of his own head.¹

We have now examined the more important of Chaucer's changes that are in any sort of agreement with the *Reinhart Fuchs* against the *Renart* version of the Cock and Fox story. They are the more important because they are the more tangible and at least offer some hold for critical analysis. It is on these differences and supposed agreements that the argument for an earlier version of the story, based upon a comparison of the works of Chaucer and Heinrich with the existing *Renart*, must finally rest its chief weight. I hope to have convinced the reader, or allowed him to convince himself, that they offer no real support for such an argument.

Let us now turn to the three points that we have omitted—Nos. 3, 5, and 6, remembering that they have lost the prestige that comes of being part of an imposing list, and must now stand on their own merits.

¹ Cf. Foulet, *Roman de Renard*, p. 403.

3. The time of day.—“In *R.F.* and *N.P.T.* the action of the story begins at daybreak.” It begins at daybreak in *Renart* too, although this is not expressly stated. Pinte tells Chantecler,

Ainz que voiez passé midi,
Vos avandra, ce est la voire. [ll. 252–53.]

But when the *bone feme* comes to call her hens and finds the fox, her coming is explained by the lines

Car vespres ert, por ce voloit
Ses jelines remetre en toit. [ll. 371–72.]

“There is plainly a discrepancy here and no doubt the original form of the story agreed in its definition of time with *R.F.* and *N.P.T.*” Yes, if we have other sufficient reasons for assuming this hypothetical “original form,” but not otherwise. Discrepancy there is. But suppose that Chaucer and Heinrich both found the discrepancy in their common source: they would both unhesitatingly remove it by paying no attention to the two verses

Car vespres ert, por ce voloit
Ses jelines remetre en toit.

Their agreement is as well explained by the presence of the discrepancy in their original as by its absence. Whether the faulty chronology in *Renart* be due to the negligence of Pierre de Saint-Cloud or to the need felt by some later copyist of giving motive for the opportune appearance of the woman, we have no means of knowing. If we assume an earlier “original form,” we offer another and no better explanation of the agreement of Chaucer and *R.F.*, and we leave the discrepancy in the work of Pierre de Saint-Cloud unexplained.

We have still left Nos. 5 and 6. The first of these is that in both *N.P.T.* and *R.F.* “the cock has a sense of humor and in both he shows it at the expense of women.” The second point is this (p. 85):

The poet of *R.F.* shows the same tendency to treat his cock and hen as human personages that Chaucer shows throughout. Pinte begs Schantecler to take care of himself for his children’s sake and pictures her distress as a bereft wife if his recklessness leads him to destruction. The cock’s sense of humor which has just been mentioned is in the same strain. This peculiarity of style, like the other resemblances, is a trait which Chaucer’s original may have shared with the original of *R.F.*

Evidently Miss Petersen feels the weakness of these two arguments, even when their flanks are protected by Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7, 8, for instead of "doubtless," "no doubt," and "highly probable" we have here "quite possible" and "may have been." An adequate discussion of these points would demand a consideration of Chaucer's peculiar type of humor and of the question why he should put his good-natured satire on women in the mouth of the Nun's Priest—a discussion which we do not care to undertake here. It would further require a discussion of the animals as human beings, not merely in the Cock and Fox story of Branch II, but in all the branches of the *Roman de Renard* that were sources for Heinrich. The results even then would depend largely upon a subjective element that would weaken their value in any event. Furthermore, we agree with Miss Petersen's evident doubt as to the convincing power of these two arguments. Unless the other points are established they have none at all.

It would seem, then, that there is no sufficient reason to be found in a comparison of Chaucer, Heinrich, and Pierre de Saint-Cloud for assuming earlier French versions of the Cock and Fox story. Foulet draws his arguments against the existence of such versions from other sources. As far as his conclusions are concerned, there is nothing in a study of Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* to make us question their accuracy. They must be attacked on other grounds, if at all. As for Chaucer, it would, perhaps, be more fruitful to adopt a saner method of research which would not put his literary product more or less upon the same level as a folk-tale, and would grant him somewhat more of that large measure of intelligence and understanding of the story-teller's art that his work shows him to have possessed.

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